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“All these little pushes and nudges”: uncovering ordinary beliefs about God’s work in the pre-Christian life

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“All these little pushes and nudges”: uncovering ordinary beliefs about God’s work in the pre-Christian life

ABSTRACT

In the Classical Pentecostal movement, theologies of religion have historically been shaped by an adopted exclusivist model, whereby there can be no salvation apart from Christ. Since the end of the last century, Pentecostal scholars have been making headway in challenging this stereotype and exploring other possible avenues for a uniquely Pentecostal theology of religions. By exploring the ordinary theology of interview participants, this article contributes to the discussion in two main ways: (1) by mapping some of the ways that ordinary believers consider God to have been at work in their life before becoming a Christian, and (2) by critically analysing assumptions that emerge from this ordinary theology and the implication of these for an ever-developing Pentecostal theology of religions.

KEYWORDS: Pentecostalism, theology of religions, ordinary theology, conversion

Introduction

In the Classical Pentecostal movement, theologies of religion have historically been shaped by an adopted exclusivist model, whereby there can be no salvation apart from Christ (Tan Chow, 2016: 22-3; Anderson, 2013).ⁱ Since the end of the last century, Pentecostal scholars have been making headway in challenging this stereotype and exploring other possible avenues for Pentecostal theology of religions, by promoting a more inclusivist approach.ⁱⁱ Despite these changes, the crux of the debate still centres on the availability (or otherwise) of salvation to non-believers. Other than the attribution of the Spirit in convicting of sin and leading souls towards faith (Karkainen, 2009: 170; Polman, 1920: 18),ⁱⁱⁱ there is little to be found in scholarship or denominational publications as to how else God is believed to work and move in pre-Christian contexts.

During a qualitative study of Pentecostal conversion experiences, almost two thirds of interview respondents acknowledged the activity of God in their life before they would identify

as having become a Christian. In light of these initial findings, this article explores the ways that ordinary Pentecostal believers claim to have experienced God at work in their lives when they did not identify as Christians. Their stories indicate that ordinary Pentecostal beliefs about God's work outside of the Christian faith are not limited to the Spirit bringing people to faith. Respondents' testimonies highlight at least five different ways that, with hindsight, they believe God was at work before they came to faith. These findings are then critically analysed to identify assumptions made by respondents and the implications of these assumptions for an emerging Pentecostal theology of religions.

Pentecostalism and the theology of religions

The data for this article comes from a congregational study of one Pentecostal church in the UK. As such, it is important to outline the Pentecostal relationship with theologies of religion in order to properly understand the significance of the findings that follow. The theology of religions has historically been concerned with the work of God outside of the Church or beyond the salvific work of Christ. For most, this has centred on the question of whether salvation is available to those (a) beyond the Church (ecclesiocentric) or (b) who do not have a professed faith in Christ as saviour (Christocentric) (Wong, 1994). Typically, Classical Pentecostalism has held a Christocentric-exclusivist outlook but there have been more recent theological moves into pneumatological-inclusivism, as we shall see below.

In keeping with the development of the fledgling movement more broadly, Pentecostals have typically been grouped under an Evangelical model (Yong, 1999; Knitter, 2002: 21). According to Knitter, the stereotypical Evangelical (read Pentecostal) approach is an exclusivist approach, referred to as the Replacement Model. The Replacement Model can be further separated into two categories: total replacement and partial replacement.^{iv} Both categories hold that there is no salvation available within the beliefs and practices of other religions; however they differ on the question of revelation. Total replacement sees no value in other religions while partial replacement suggests there may be revelation in other religions, but not salvation. Within this model, even an exclusivist approach can acknowledge the revelation of God outside of the Christian faith, through the distinction between God's universal presence and Christ's particular salvation.

Recent moves away from the assumed Evangelical model have argued for Pentecostalism to reflect on its own distinctive theology of religions, which could look more like inclusivism than exclusivism. Like exclusivism, Christian inclusivism holds Christ's saving work as the pinnacle of religion, however this 'is available not only for those who hear his name; saving grace must be universally available in all cultures' (Okholm and Ross, 1994: 24).

Perhaps the most dramatic turning point for Christian inclusivism in recent history was in the Roman Catholic adoption of Karl Rahner's concept of Anonymous Christians during the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). Anonymous Christianity has been much debated, with critics on both sides accusing its proponents of patronizing non-Christians or undermining the role of faith in Christ for salvation. Nonetheless, a modified version of Rahner's concept was instrumental in helping to move Roman Catholic thought forward in the area of mission. It marked 'a significant shift from ecclesiocentrism to Christocentrism' (Knitter, 1984: 50), allowing, for the first time, for the possibility of other religions having a role to play in God's salvific plans through Christ, albeit unknowingly (Rahner, 1974).

Not all Pentecostal scholars are convinced by existing inclusivist models, which traditionally take Christ as a starting point and, subsequently, focus on salvation. The concept of Anonymous Christians is a key example whereby the issue of Christ's particularity in salvation is the cornerstone upon which the theory is built. Studebaker has critiqued theologies that he sees are limiting members of the trinity into specifically defined salvation 'roles' (e.g. Christ as the achiever and the Spirit as the applier). He argues instead for a more Trinitarian approach, which does not subordinate the Spirit, in particular, to a seemingly lesser role in salvation (Studebaker, 2003).

Others have argued further for a pneumatological approach which sidesteps soteriology altogether in matters of inter-religious relations (Yong, 2000; Awad, 2011; Richie, 2011). A pneumatological approach takes the Holy Spirit (*pneuma*) as its starting point and offers a unique outlook from this perspective. This elevating of the Spirit appeals to Pentecostal scholars and it is unsurprising that some of the most outspoken proponents of this approach have been Pentecostals. Yong explains:

...whereas previous thinking about religions focused on whether or not they were or are salvific, a pneumatological theology of religions asks whether or not and how, if so, the religions are divinely providential instruments designed for various purposes. (2004: 191)

God's work here is not simply understood as the movement of God in convicting and converting individuals. Yong warns against "Christianizing" or "demonizing" the other when making assessments of the Spirit's presence based on Christian criteria (ibid: 192). Rather, he encourages the use of non-Christian criteria; whether non-biblical or criteria derived from other religious traditions. To take the Spirit as a starting point rather than the incarnate Logos is a significant move away from more traditional theological discussions within other denominations, which tend towards Christocentric soteriology. However, for Pentecostals, the divine person of the Holy Spirit, having existed with the Son eternally, creates no conflict or hierarchy to suggest that s/he should not provide a starting point to discussions of God's salvific work and revelatory presence.

So, Pentecostal theology of religions finds itself at a turning point. Some scholars are forging new roads through inclusivism, while simultaneously an evangelical exclusivism remains in many corners. The empirical findings outlined in this article add to the conversation in two ways. Firstly, by bringing 'ordinary/empirical theology' into the discussion. Pentecostalism grows its theology from the ground up and is rooted firmly in experience. Therefore, an understanding of people's experiences prior to conversion will help make the discussion of God's activity outside of the Church personal for believers and shed some new light on the debate. Secondly, this study brings the experiences of those who (in the UK context) would self-identify as having 'no religion', into theology of religion discussions, which is often overlooked in favour of professing believers of other faiths.

This second contribution reflects the state of (un)belief that respondents held prior to identifying as Christians. I have decided upon the term 'pre-Christian' to designate this stage in their lives, but this term requires some explanation.

Defining the Pre-Christian Life

For Pentecostals it might seem that self-identity as either Christian or non-Christian is relatively straightforward as it is not accepted that one is simply born into the faith and so it must be possible to say that there was, for all believers, a time before conversion. However, empirical studies of conversion experiences reveal that conversion can best be understood as a process (Rambo, 1993; Cartledge and Wakefield, 2002; Gooren, 2010; Milton, 2015) and that Pentecostal believers can view themselves as having undergone more than one

‘conversion’ throughout their lifetime (Milton, 2015). This is not to suggest that salvation is seen to occur more than once, but rather that conversion is distinct from, albeit necessary for, salvation.

The above challenges the validity of terms such as pre- and post- conversion. These terms imply that conversion is an identifiable moment, which for many it is not. Further clarification is certainly required. The definition I am using here of conversion, is that typically used by Pentecostals themselves, their self-identification of being born again. For Pentecostals, being born again involves a personal decision to repent of sins and an active decision to accept Jesus Christ as saviour. Importance is placed on the individual making this personal decision of faith, rather than through ritual or an outward manifestation, and so it is very difficult for an outsider to identify this time. Self-identification as a convert is crucial.

For some, conversion refers to their first repentance and commitment to Christ, whereas for others, a re-commitment experience can be considered a conversion experience also (McKnight, 2009: 102). In order to reflect this reality while also honouring the uniqueness of the former experience within Pentecostalism, I have made a distinction in previous work (2015) between ‘initial conversion’ and ‘subsequent conversions’. I argue that ‘the initial decision to become a Christian must necessarily be considered as special and distinct...because this is how salvation, adoption and the Spirit is believed to be received in the first instance’ (p.210). In this article I am specifically focusing on the perceived work of God in respondents’ lives prior to this ‘initial conversion’. Whether or not they can pinpoint the exact day and time that they made this decision, there are stories within their testimony narratives which clearly take place in a time which they consider to be prior.

The term Pre-Christian helps to differentiate from the label of ‘non-Christian’. When seeking to avoid certain associations, pre-Christian can be a more inclusive alternative. For example, pre-Christian has been preferred to the term ‘non-Christian’ for many African theologians, as the latter seems to remove an individual/group from any association with Christ’s influence. Rather, pre-Christian history and traditions (e.g. African traditional religions) can instead be viewed as containing engagement with God, and Christian affiliation is a continuation of that pre-Christian experience (Bediako, 2000, Donovan, 1982). If this can be said of communities and traditions, then perhaps the same can be said of individual experiences also.

Pre-Christian is an imperfect term. Nonetheless it is the most accurate of the options available. Pre-Christian, in this context, refers to before the individual self-identifies as having made a genuine, personal, initial decision to follow Christ (whether through Pentecostalism or another denomination at the time). Therefore, any activity of God referred to prior to this time must be attributed to God's work outside of their professed Christian life.

Methods

The findings which inform this article come from a practical-theological research project exploring the conversion experiences and beliefs of Pentecostals.^v This project consisted of a three-year case study of an Elim congregation and looked at experiences of conversion for Pentecostals from three levels of theological discourse: academic, denominational and ordinary (Cartledge, 2010: 18-20).

Life story interviews (or testimonies) were collected and analysed to identify the ordinary theologies of respondents in relation to their own conversion experiences. During the process of analysis, a theme emerged which suggested a belief in the activity of God prior to conversion in the majority of respondents' testimonies. These comments do not challenge the belief that salvation is received through faith in Christ, however they do suggest a variety of ways that God is believed to work in the lives of non-believers. They provide insight into those questions which are often lost amid the cacophony of voices seeking to answer the "salvation question".

While the overall project did not seek to explore the theology of religions for Pentecostal believers, these findings warrant particular analysis. There are two main objectives of this article: (1) to map some of the ways that ordinary believers consider God to have been at work in their life before becoming a Christian, and (2) to critically analyse assumptions that emerge from this ordinary theology in the light of a developing Pentecostal theology of religions.

Research population

The Lighthouse Christian Fellowship (LCF) was founded in the early 1980's when a small group broke away from a neighbouring congregation to begin their own church.^{vi} As of 2012, the congregation consists of over 500 attendees at Sunday worship services, of which there are

three per week, as well as running multiple mid-week fellowship, bible study, outreach and charitable activities within the church and the local community. The make-up of the congregation is multi-cultural, well-educated and represents people of all ages.

As a member of the Elim Movement, the church adheres to the Statement of Faith of the Elim Foursquare Gospel Alliance. Elim is the second largest Pentecostal group in the UK, after the Assemblies of God, and follows in the tradition of Classical Pentecostalism. Its founder, George Jeffreys was converted during the Welsh Revival in 1904 (Robinson, 2005) and the movement began in Monaghan, Ireland in January 1915. Elim came to Birmingham during a phenomenal revival in 1930 in which 10,000 people were recorded to have been born again amidst healings and spiritual manifestations (Jones, 1930). The LCF can trace its history back, through its mother church, to the Birmingham Revival.

Participants

The criteria for participation in interviews were that participants; (1) were members or regular attendees of LCF, (2) self-professed as ‘born again’ and (3) were over the age of eighteen. The wider study involved 30 participants, of whom 19 made unprompted reference to God’s activity in their pre-converted life during their life story interviews. The wider sample was made up of 18 female and 12 male respondents between the ages of 20 to 86 years of age. Despite attempts at recruiting a balance of genders, the availability of the researcher predominantly during the daytime and early evening contributed to a larger proportion of female respondents.

Uncovering ordinary theology through conversion narratives

Data for the main project was collected using qualitative empirical methods, predominantly; participant observation, analysis of denominational literature and semi-structured interviews. The researcher conducted four preliminary focus group interviews before selecting thirty individual members of the congregation for in-depth interviews. Interviews involved the respondents telling their testimony freely, in their own words and uninterrupted (ranging from 20-60 minutes). The interviewer then prompted further details by asking open ended questions or questions of clarification depending on the detail of the testimony.^{vii} Overall, the numbers of respondents in each category reflect a small sample size, however their beliefs are no less significant.

Ordinary theology can be defined as the reflected God-talk of believers who have received no formal theological education (Astley, 2002: 1). In this study, respondents were

asked to talk through their life story narrative, encompassing their conversion/s and perceived encounters with God. The fact that their stories were told in response to this request means that they can be considered 'reflected'. However, I disagree with Astley's assumption that ordinary theology is symptomatic of a lack of formal theological education. Rather, it should be noted that even formally theologically educated individuals are not exempt from holding ordinary and sometimes conflicting theological beliefs in their lived religious experience. Most respondents were not formally theologically educated but one or two were. For Pentecostals especially, testimony is the primary location of their ordinary theology of conversion, as conversion itself involves a process of participation in a (biblical) metanarrative (Nel, 2014: 295). Therefore, there is a belief for many that personal experience, recounted through testimony, is a way of knowing something of the nature of God. Crucially for this study, Pentecostal testimony says, "this happened to me, and it can happen to you!"

Findings

Of 30 overall respondents, 19 people mentioned God's activity in their pre-Christian life, totaling 64 references on this theme in total. Of these references I have identified five main themes as to how respondents perceived God was present and active in their pre-Christian life:

1. Leading people to faith
2. Protection
3. Timing and orchestrating events
4. Background presence
5. Destiny and guiding

Leading people to faith

This is the main role attributed to God in pre-conversion Pentecostal theology. Nine respondents identified God as working in their life to lead them to faith. This is unsurprising, as it is largely uncontested within Pentecostalism that 'the Spirit is the one who brings

conviction of sin and conversion, leading believers to heart knowledge of the reconciling work of Christ' (Anderson, 2005: 340; see also Coulter, 2009).

Carole not only believed that the Spirit was involved in her initial decision to accept Christ as her saviour, she also identified that he had then prepared her heart for hearing and receiving the message of Pentecostalism:

You know like my initial conversion I was very young, I think the Holy Spirit had to be involved in that and then all through the years even though there was probably, as I was saying I was hot and cold and I was on and off with my faith, I believe the Holy Spirit was moving gently but gradually and steadily. I was at a place of real hunger in my life as a teenager searching and feeling insecure when my friend told me about Pentecostalism. So I don't think it was a co-incidence that I was prepared and eagerly looking for some kind of reality when I met up with my friends and they introduced me to Pentecostalism. So I think that's how the Holy Spirit works with the timings of things and preparing our hearts.

Leading toward faith also took the form of an active spiritual experience. Beth describes an emotional encounter during her time at an Alpha course where she began crying uncontrollably. In hindsight, she identifies this as the Holy Spirit attempting to lead her towards faith:

I think that was him desperately trying to get through to me and saying "come on Beth, it's time". That was – oh gosh I can't even describe it. It was so out of my control. I just – I sat there and it just overwhelmed me and I don't know, I couldn't tell you why, I couldn't tell you what. There wasn't anything specific but it just overwhelmed me and that was the Holy Spirit, but I wasn't ready. He came close to getting me to open that door but I just – I fought it.

It is typical of ordinary theology that this respondent attributed to the Holy Spirit an experience which could more logically have been attributed to Christ. Beth's reference to opening a door is related to a speaker on the Alpha course speaking on Revelation 3:20 'Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me' (NIV). This verse is attributed to Jesus Christ, and the Alpha speaker used a painting of Christ by Holman Hunt (*Light of the World*) as an illustration of this point. Nonetheless, Beth attributes the 'knocking' to the Holy Spirit.

Acknowledging God's work in leading individuals to faith is to be expected. However, the following four themes raise more interesting questions for Pentecostal theology of religions.

Protection

Seven respondents believed that prior to their conversion, God was watching over and protecting them and/or their family. Rebekah tells the following story of an attempted abduction when she was a young girl:

I do believe that God had his hand on me even though I wasn't at church then...He was asking me how much pocket money I'd got and if I went with him I would have more money. I know if it wasn't for the Lord – I'm sort of thinking in front – I could have been dead. He could have just took off or raped – anything. [I] just forced the door and fell out and ran for my life.

Rebekah clearly attributes getting away not to her own strength or to the circumstances being in her favour but to 'the Lord'. In her understanding of events, without God's protection during that time, the situation could have turned out much worse.

Another respondent told a story of her infant daughter being badly scalded by boiling water. Miraculously, to her mind, on the journey to the hospital the roads were clear during what would normally have been rush hour. She believes that God had a hand in clearing the roads for their journey to ensure that they made it to the hospital in time for her daughter to be treated with no lasting damage.

In this theme, God is considered to affect changes in the physical world (e.g. increasing the strength of a small girl or removing traffic from particular areas) in order to protect individuals or their loved ones in times of crisis. The next theme is similar, however it involves affecting changes in more long term circumstances or encounters to bring about particular outcomes.

Timing and orchestration of events

Five respondents believed that God had worked in orchestrating specific events and timings for their benefit prior to their conversion. Many of these events were separate from their conversion experience. For example, Beth attributes meeting her husband, through a series of unlikely encounters and co-incidences, to God's divine intervention:

I mean how my husband and I met, it could only have been intervention because it just wasn't meant to be, but it was...I mean the chances of that happening were pretty

remote...so I mean it was just so implausible that we would actually meet but we did. There's got to have been some sort of intervention there.

For some like Beth, God is believed to have worked in their pre-converted life to bring about relationships and friendships for their benefit. For others, the timing and orchestration of events were what eventually led them to faith. I have separated these accounts from the 'leading to faith' category because there is a clear distinction from the belief that God was preparing their heart to receive the gospel or trying to get through to them in the form of a spiritual experience. Rather these accounts record the belief that the timing of their conversion, through the events leading up to it, the sermons heard and the people encountered, was designed by God and orchestrated according to his plan.

Ian recalls attending the Alpha Course, a ten week evangelistic course designed to introduce (and reintroduce) people to the core beliefs of Christianity. He sees the timing of his conversion as being orchestrated by God for his benefit before a difficult time in his life.

He said:

I don't know really, we kind of had the different sessions and it wasn't like a suddenly, "I need this". It was probably God's timing. He knew exactly when and why I needed to. It was before kind of a lot of things in life went a bit turmoil, if you know what I mean, and situations around family and stuff like that. I couldn't explain why.

Ian believed that his attendance on the course was 'God's timing', bringing him gradually into relationship with God before a time of crisis in his life. Not only does this belief attribute God a role in leading people to faith, but also to foreknowledge of life events and orchestrating people's lives around them for their benefit. For others, as in the next theme, their subsequent faith has been confirmed by the realization that God has been an ongoing presence in their life all along.

Background presence

Five respondents made reference to God's general presence in the background of their life prior to having their own personal faith. These references are generally vague and can easily fit into the other categories, but the difference is that background presence does not come with concrete

examples. It is more of a feeling. Christopher explains: ‘It amazes me how Jesus was always there in the background throughout my entire life, even up to the day where I accepted Christ as my lord and saviour.’

This is something that is only seen with hindsight and it raises the question of whether or not this presence is something projected onto past events. It also raises the question of whether they would consider God to be present in everyone’s life and, if so, how this manifests itself.

Destiny and guidance

Finally, four respondents alluded to God’s guidance in their life prior to their conversion. In opposition to the theme of God’s timing and orchestrating of events, whereby the believer is seen to play a rather passive role in God’s movements, God’s guidance was never seen to be overt but rather involved gentle prompting and suggestion from a number of different sources with the onus then on the respondent to make a decision as to how to move forward. Importantly, these subtle prompts can only be detected with the benefit of hindsight. As one respondent explained, ‘it’s only looking back that you realise all those little pushes and nudges’.

Discussion

Broadening our understanding of pre-Christian experiences of God has important implications for beliefs about God’s presence in the lives of anyone who does not profess faith in the Christian God. This study relates directly to the lives of atheists and agnostics, and the shape of God’s activity in these lives from a Pentecostal perspective, although the same reflective testimony approach could be used by other denominations.

Respondents’ testimonies provide clear examples of ways that respondents believe God was at work in their lives before they came to faith. These examples unsurprisingly include the Spirit’s work in preparing them for faith (through conviction or circumstances), but also involve other facets. We hear about God’s underlying presence as well as God’s active protection and guidance, sometimes being recognised at the time but more frequently reframed in hindsight. These experiences can be perhaps thought of in terms of God’s revelation as self-

communication in the ordinary as well as the extraordinary (O'Collins, 2016). The unprompted nature of these contributions leads me to believe that there would have been significantly more if respondents had been asked specifically about their experiences of/beliefs about God's work in their lives before they became Christian. It is important to note that these narratives are particular to the individuals who shared them and, therefore, these findings cannot be considered to be generalizable within Pentecostalism, let alone among other denominations.

The themes listed above will not be unique to Pentecostal believers, however, they are of interest to Pentecostals specifically in their developing identity and theology. For non-Pentecostals, the model I have used of exploring personal narratives to uncover ordinary theologies of God's work in the pre-Christian life, will be of interest and are reproducible within different contexts. The comparison between ordinary beliefs and academic or denominational doctrines is always a worthwhile endeavor when taking stock of theology across all levels of faith.

Based on the above snapshots that we have of these respondents' ordinary theologies, I can identify two key insights, which warrant for further discussion for Pentecostal theologians: (1) the inclusivist assumptions underlying their responses, and (2) the hints of a prosperity theology that appear to emerge. I will discuss each in turn below.

Inclusivist assumptions

As the literature suggests, Pentecostal theologies of religion have typically been Christocentric-exclusivist, with a relatively recent move towards pneumato-centric-inclusivism. What appears to emerge from the data outlined in the previous pages is an assumption of inclusivism from the respondents, at a superficial level at least. While the issue of salvation prior to affiliation does not arise, their claims of revelation, protection and engagement with God prior to their Christian affiliation is overt and unmistakable. There are no suggestions that their stories are considered to be unusual or particular to them, and so we can infer that these stories do not raise theological issues for the respondents.

The narratives outlined fit into an 'Anonymous Christian' mold, so to speak, and support, at least at a superficial level, the kind of theology espoused by Bediako and Donovan, whereby the pre-Christian experience can be seen to involve a revelation of the divine as a kind of preparation to encountering Christ. Of course, these theologians and the related concept of Anonymous Christians, tend to reflect the beliefs and traditions of whole communities as

preparation for or way towards salvation through Christ. However, the testimonies explored in this paper are typical of a more individualistic soteriology that emerges from Pentecostalism's roots within the Evangelical tradition.

It would be significant for Pentecostal theologians (as well as practical theologians seeking to include ordinary theology into a theology of religions more broadly) to explore these seemingly inclusivist threads within life story narratives from a communal perspective as well as individualised soteriologies.

Hints at prosperity theology

More controversially, the ordinary theology of my respondents revealed hints of a kind of prosperity gospel. The prosperity gospel is familiar to global Pentecostalism, particularly within neo-Pentecostal groups and emerges across a range of socio-economic contexts. According to the *Historical Dictionary of New Religious Movements*, Prosperity Theology is often attributed to the Word-Faith Movement 'in which it is alleged that followers can gain material and financial prosperity through prayer and naming one's desired boon' (2011, p.252). Located within material prosperity is also a belief in physical and spiritual healing, available for all believers as a result of faith. Hence the more colloquial label, the 'Health and Wealth Gospel'. Within this theology, 'the state of a prosperous life signals the state of blessedness and redemption reserved for those who are members of the Kingdom of God on earth...' (Agana, 2015, 245).

My respondents did not talk about financial or material gain, as such, in their narratives. However, there is an observable theme of blessing associated with God providing physical protection, relational success and mental/spiritual wellbeing to those who would eventually come to profess a Christian faith. This is where the respondents' ordinary theologies deviate from a more extreme word-faith expression, whereby prosperity is endowed upon the naming of the blessing one desires. In this study, faith is not yet professed or expressed and therefore it could be considered that these blessings are in some way retroactive.

Without further research, it is unclear whether respondents would consider that they were provided for by God in these ways because they are God's creation and therefore these blessings are available to all, or whether they attribute these blessings to the faith that they would go on to profess. Either way, there is a clear understanding that God's work in the lives of pre-Christians is considered to be positive from a material, relational and physical

perspective. In addition, the prosperity gospel has been recognised as an extreme version of a wider Pentecostal perspective on salvation as containing ‘worldly’ benefits to the individual as well as rewards in the afterlife (Agana, 2015). Therefore, it is not surprising that Pentecostal believers attribute these positive (in worldly terms) experiences to the work of God.

Whether this ordinary theology really does go so far as prosperity theology will require further exploration, but there is certainly an element of triumphalism implicit within these narratives. It is recognized that God was working in these circumstances because the outcomes are considered to be positive and miraculous, benefitting the individual or their loved ones. In addition, I would argue that the inclusion of positive and miraculous encounters as a means of persuading one’s audience is a hallmark of Pentecostal testimony. However, it is important that they do not go unchallenged, as they may reflect a broader tendency towards triumphalism to the exclusion of theologies that recognise the reality and spiritual legitimacy of suffering and poverty.

Conclusion

God’s work in the pre-Christian life is more multifaceted than room has been allowed for in previous classical Pentecostal theologies. These reach further into the everyday experiences of believers than simply the work of the Spirit in conviction and bringing people to faith. For example, many positive encounters that respondents recall prior to conversion, are retrospectively attributed to God’s blessing. It will be important for a developing theology of religions to find out whether or not this is reflective of a belief that God works for the good of everyone, or that they were influenced by a kind of ‘retrospective blessing’.

Significantly, an ordinary theology akin to inclusivism has emerged. The suggestion that theologies and experiences at ground level are more inclusivist than traditional Pentecostal theologies have been, is an exciting prospect for those seeking to move Pentecostal theology of religions from a Christocentric-exclusivist stance, towards a more pneumatological-inclusivist perspective.

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ⁱ The singularity of the term 'Pentecostal' here is not intended to imply a homogeneity to the movement, this would be incorrect. Rather the term is used for simplicity.

ⁱⁱ Particularly the heated exchanged between Richie and Moon from 2006-2013 in the *Journal of Pentecostal Theology*.

ⁱⁱⁱ Conviction of sin here is seen to be an initial step towards repentance and acceptance of Christ as saviour. John 16:8 can often be taken to refer to a personal conviction of the individual. The early Elim publication, the Elim Evangel, for instance, refers to this convicting power of the Spirit when describing the Spirit's activity during revivals; 'there was pride, self-glory, self-effort, self-will, unbrokenness and harshness, all revealed by the Holy Spirit's convicting power' p.18 (Polman, G.R. "What God is doing in Holland" *Elim Evangel*, 2(1) (Dec. 1920) 18-19).

^{iv} The typology of inclusivism, exclusivism and pluralism have been challenged in detail in recent years and have undergone a variety of attempts at rebranding from a range of perspectives, from non-Christian theologies, post-colonial theology and feminist theology in particular (see, Harris, Hedges and Hettiararchchi (eds) (2016) *Twenty-First Century Theologies of Religion*) However for the purposes of this article the traditional terms will suffice in order to allow for the progression of Pentecostal theologies of religions to be

made apparent. For scholars who would wish to move these findings on, it would be necessary to revisit and challenge the traditional typology afresh for the global Pentecostal movement

^v The full study can be found in Milton (2015).

^{vi} Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of the church and respondents.

^{vii} Interviews were all transcribed and anonymised individually by the researcher. This study developed theory inductively using thematic analysis of interview transcripts